

Public Library Association Webinar on Re-Weaving the Culture through Inclusive Norms in the Public Library

Date: June 3, 2021 (notes by Andrea Davidson)

Moderator: Derek Wolfgram (he/him) Redwood City Public Library,

Panelists: James Allen Davis Jr. from Denver Public Library; Lalitha Nataraj (she/her) from California State University in San Marcos; Sonia Falcon from Denver Public Library (she's a social worker); Chantel L. Walker (she/her) Assistant Director at the Marin County Free Library (MCFL) in San Rafael, CA

Upcoming Opportunities:

Dismantling racism in collaborative collections, Wednesday June 9, at 1pm central time (paid webinar, you can register here: <http://www.ala.org/pla/education/onlinelearning/webinars/dismantling>)

Joint Conference of Librarians of Colour in 2022 <https://www.jclcinc.org/jclc-2022>

Social Media to Follow:

IG: @BIPOC_in_LIS & @libvoices

Encouraged Reading:

20 Subtle Ways White Supremacy Manifests in Non-Profit and Philanthropy: <https://nonprofitaf.com/2021/06/20-subtle-ways-white-supremacy-manifests-in-nonprofit-and-philanthropy/>

Nataraj, Lalitha, Holly Hampton, Talitha R. Matlin, and Yvonne Nalani Meulemans. 2020. "Nice White Meetings": Unpacking Absurd Library Bureaucracy through a Critical Race Theory Lens." *Canadian Journal of Academic Librarianship* 6: 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.33137/cjal-rcbu/v6.34340> © Lalitha

Nataraj, Holly Hampton, Talitha R. Matlin, Yvonne Nalani Meulemans, CC BY-NC. *White Supremacy culture* Tema Okun, dRworks, www.dismantlingracism.org <https://bit.ly/3uJwo7>. Tema discusses the 15 Elements of White Supremacy in more detail in the article and shares specific examples and recommendations for dismantling them. Here is a short summary of them:

- Perfectionism
- Sense of urgency
- Quantity over quality

- Worship of the written word
- Only one right way
- Paternalism
- Either/or thinking
- Power hoarding
- Fear of open conflict
- Individualism
- I'm the only one
- Progress is bigger
- Objectivity
- Right to comfort

What's the impact that white supremacy can have on the work culture?

- Decision makers often assume that they're capable of making decisions
- People in power assume they can and should make decisions for those not in power

Recommendations for changing this work culture

- Making sure everyone understands and knows who makes decisions and why
- Make sure everyone knows the budget
- Include people affected by decisions in decision making

Questions for the Panelists:

1. Can you please talk about a time when non-inclusive norms at your workplaces has caused problems for you and your colleagues?

James

- Saw a real pro-white affinity bias in hiring and promotion – when the hiring panel says that they're looking for someone who 'fits' into your culture, it means they're looking for someone that looks like themselves

- Issue with promotion, hiring and retention of BIPOC
- BIPOC people were hired but wouldn't stay
- Working in BIPOC library communities but not addressing key issues like over-policing
- He created RADA (Read awareness dialogue and action), RADA hosts book discussion events among other things
- James – didn't see himself in the library or in the library staff

Chantel

- Only saw managers coming to equity alliance meetings, that was a problem
- To change this, the library started discouraging managers from coming and began trying to make it possible for other staff members to attend the meetings (e.g. secure desk coverage)

Lalitha

- Need to think of non-inclusive norms from an institutional level - they are embedded in bureaucratic norms that uphold whiteness
- Libraries have long assumed that policies are for the benefit for everyone but that's not true they actively harm BIPOC staffers (policies are not neutral)
- She shared two examples
- E.g. once during a performance review – she was told by her manager that her colleagues thought she needed to smile more
- This shows how non-inclusive norms are connected to white womanhood and are codified in dress codes, behavioural norms (e.g. 'smiling more')
- E.g. during an evening shift she texted about a staff member's abrupt quitting – she texted her colleagues within the department to give them a heads up that they're going to have to be ready to have difficult conversations the next day
- She was reprimanded for this text, told she was gossiping, she was told that she had violated confidentiality

- The result was that the organization sacrificed relationality because they were concerned about liabilities— she told that she was ‘less professional’ than two other colleagues that were white

Sonia

- Banning youth policy at her library. seemed problematic – found evidence that there were racial disparities in who was banned – 89% of youth who were banned were Black or Latino
- Second set of data from 2019 reaffirmed those numbers, that over 90% of youth were youth of colour
- One of the difficulties of diversity committees is that they often have little actual power to make changes
- Need to use lived experiences to inform policy
- Saw a lot of denial, heard pushback from white management e.g. “we had a conversation about that last year, why are we talking about it again?” “I didn’t understand how the data was collected”, this was used as an excuse for not acting on the data the first time around

2.What is the best way to engage with BIPOC staff members’ so their voices are being heard and acted upon but without placing additional burden or emotional labour on them? How do we respectfully centre BIPOC staff?

Chantel

- need to understand that librarianship started as a white profession, a largely white female profession
- Realized that all BIPOC staffers were meeting after work while white people meet during working hours – why?
- Libraries need to add EDI to their mission statement, strategic priorities
- Staffers read anti-racism books together
- Sitting in discomfort is necessary
- Need to explain why centering matters to all staff. Why? to better serve marginalized different communities, retain BIPOC employees, etc.

James

- You have to be intentional, very strategic about it, you need to put the work in, having affinity groups is really important
- Analyze how the communication in an organization works
- Holding back information keeps us from centering BIPOC voices
- Have to critique your organization, rethink best intentions that are not having the desired effect

3.Can you share a structural, concrete action that libraries can take to reweave the culture?

Lalitha

- consider reframing gossip as a tactic of resistance: gossip is a significant tool of info sharing among marginalized groups, it can disrupt organizational practices

Sonia

- Really operationalize the principle of nothing without us about us

Attendees Questions

1. How do you hire BIPOC people and avoid assigning them only to working in underserved branches and communities?

James

- They changed interview panels and who was sitting on them: have a diverse interview panel
- Remove assumptions about who we should put into marginalized communities
- Had a conversation on gentrification but only white women in the audience
- Understand why you're hiring BIPOC people: because that have excellent skills!

Chantel

- In the Latino and African American communities, think about the collections, it's important to have staff who have both learned and lived experiences, need to have diverse collections in primarily white communities

- Have to make sure that in majority white communities, Latino Librarian can be the manager there
- Reconsider distribution of resources
- BIPOC staff talk – start authentically hiring them and word will get around that your library is a library of choice

Derek

- Advertise jobs where people of colour are going to see those ads, can't just post on library website, need to find the gatekeepers of BIPOC communities

2. If you're starting this work today, where should you start?

Chantel

- Start with your data – harder to argue/pushback against data e.g. # of BIPOC staffers/managers you have
- Contact libraries that have already started the work, speak with colleagues

Derek

- Make spaces for BIPOC people
- Create an actually supportive work culture